

# The Raven

(Excerpt)

By

Ann E. Eskridge

Two young men, one black and the other white, become Underground Railroad conductors during the most dangerous period in slavery only to discover that they have to make a choice between helping slaves escape or jeopardizing their lifelong friendship

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Praise for *The Raven*

“One of the best things about this novel is how visual and emotional it is...what a relatable, well-drawn tale.”

--WordHustler.com

*The Raven* received honorable mention in the Literary Storm Contest

“A final commendable distinction about Eskridge’s account is the way she ‘ups the ante’ of the theme, by infusing into her story the possibility of social resolution.”

--Phyllis Lodge

Writer/lecturer

## Dedication and Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my parents, Marguerite and Arnett, who encouraged my creativity and independence; and, I would like to thank my brothers, Arnett and Gregory, who, in their own way, have faced adversity and come out the better for it. I am so proud of both of you.

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*All Raven Poems and Raven Songs*  
written by Ann E. Eskridge

*These poems and songs:*  
*When We Are Old*  
*Tomorrow*  
*I Love You Dear*  
*When Mammy Rocks Her Little One to Sleep*  
*A Kiss*  
written by Thomas Alfred Anderson

*Oh Worship the King* hymn  
written by Robert C. Grant, 1779-1838 From Psalm 104

## Advisory

It is, after all, the 1850's and political correctness was not a priority. Therefore, there is the use of the "n" word, as well as other names whites called blacks, and blacks called themselves. There are also a few graphic scenes of violence meant to underscore that blacks, at that time, were not considered human and were not treated as such. We need reminders of the way things were in order not to repeat our ignoble past.

## Background

The Compromise of 1850 became the turning point of the abolitionist movement, a movement to end slavery. When this act passed, some persons who had been neutral about slavery rallied to the abolitionist cause. When slave hunters began roaming into free states looking for fugitive slaves, many ordinary citizens refused to surrender the accused and fought with their fists and through the legal system to protect the fugitives. And because of this act, the Underground Railroad, the secret network of persons, both black and white, who helped fugitive slaves escape, became stronger and bolder.

*...After that they all heard a big sing of wings. It was John come back, riding on a great black crow. The crow was so big that one wing rested on the morning, while the other dusted off the evening star. John lighted down and helped them, so they all mounted on, and the bird took out straight across the deep blue sea.*

---Zora Neal Hurston

## Chapter One

Kentucky Woods—November 1850

“Val,” Solomon grunted while wrestling with the frenzied slave. “... she won’t stay in the coffin.” Valentine turned his head and saw the two struggling. The light from the lantern cast images of Solomon and the slave woman as silhouettes against the wooded backdrop. In the dark, the trees were nothing more than black skeletons—and Solomon and the slave girl—grotesque shadow puppets. Only two weeks before the countryside was ablaze with autumnal color. The trees were a bouquet of burnt orange, goldenrod and sizzling scarlet. Then November brought with it an unseasonable cold spell that shriveled the trees, turning the landscape into murky browns.

“Val, did you hear me?” shouted Solomon, frustration putting an edge on his voice.

Valentine didn’t answer immediately. He had troubles of his own. The cork black that he had used to darken and disguise his burnished, brown face itched unmercifully, causing his eyes to water. They felt like they were swelling; and in a few minutes, he might not be able to see to drive.

“I heard you. And keep your voice down. Tell her if she doesn’t get in the coffin, we’ll take off without her, and she and her baby can be caught by patrollers,” Valentine snapped back.

“You tell her,” Solomon grunted angrily, struggling to pull the frightened woman toward the coffin.



“You’re white. She understands threats from a white man,” Valentine yelled back. He was trying to tie the soiled head rag to the black wig he was wearing, while keeping the horse steady,

“Yeah, but you’re older,” Solomon persisted.

“By four years,” Valentine retorted. Valentine heard Solomon repeat the threat about the patrollers, but the woman continued to struggle.

“Damn!” Solomon cried out, “She bit me.”

Valentine threw down the reins and climbed over the wagon seat. He made his way gingerly to the back, lifting the tattered dress he wore to keep from tripping. Solomon and the woman were still wrestling among the coffins that were stacked haphazardly three high, in two rows. The lantern resting on top of a coffin lid was threatening to tip over. Valentine pitched his voice slightly higher than normal, as if age had shriveled his vocal cords. He spoke to the young woman in the raspy tone of an old woman.

“Der...der...girlie. Ya don’t have no worries. Dis here good white man gonna save your life. He and me gonna take you ta freedom. Ain’t nobody gonna harm ya.”

The slave woman calmed down somewhat. She clutched her baby tightly in one arm, as she pointed to the top coffin with the other. “But dat der mean death,” she croaked breathlessly.

“Better ta play dead, den *be* dead. Dat dere ya passage to a new life. What do dey call ya?”

“Ruth,” she said rocking the fretting baby as it flailed weakly in her arms.

“Now, Ruth, we gotta go. We gots another one to pick up. Den we gonna head to de Ohio. Your baby cain’t be makin’ noise so, gib your baby some dis here Valerian root. Bitter taste, but it put da lamb ta sleep. And maybe you take a little too,” Valentine gave the woman the vial.

“Now you place a drop on your finger and put it in de baby’s mouth for it to suck and go ta sleep, so’s it don’t wake up if we get stopped. You do the same, if you want. Now, climb on in,” Valentine urged, taking the child into his arms while the woman stepped into the coffin. He gave the baby back to its mother and made sure that she gave the child the oil. Solomon closed the lid, leaving a small space for mother and baby to breathe.

“Thanks for your help,” Solomon said, holding up the lantern. By lamp light, Solomon stared at Valentine in wig, cork face, with puffy red eyes.

“My God, you look hideous.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” Valentine responded as he and Solomon jumped off the back of the wagon and made their way to the front. Valentine whipped the old mare, and the wagon with stacked coffins, bumped down the dirt road.

\* \* \*

Kentucky Woods—That same night

Jesse Frye was saddle sore and chilled to the bone. The only thing he was going to catch was his death. The frost came on quickly, and most folk swore it would be a bitter winter. Jesse’s ears and nose were raw from the wind. He rubbed his cold hand over his patchy stubble. What he wouldn’t give for a decent shave. His boyish face was nicked and scarred from too many mornings of cold water and a dull razor. He had decided to

grow a beard, but that was a failure. Light stubble grew in patches across his chin, and it itched like crazy.

“No nigger-stealers comin’ tonight,” Jesse said to his horse as it snorted steam from its nostrils and stomped the ground irritably.

“Yep, I feel the same dang way. Waste of time.” He scratched his chest through the itchy heavy wool of his frock coat and hacked a wad of tobacco onto the frosty ground, wiping off the juice before it stuck to his face. Jesse shook his head vigorously to keep awake and let out a gurgling yawn.

Five nights in a row, he had patrolled the road two miles outside of town that led to the river. And five nights in a row there was nothing to arouse his suspicions. But the night sounds played havoc with his imagination. Every rustle of dead leaves or snap of a twig made him flinch.

To Jesse, the talk of nigger stealers was foolish. No one was that smart to go up against the law. The countryside was swarming with constables, deputies and any gadabout with a gun willing to earn a few dollars using darkies as target practice. Just the other day two boys wandered in half-starved and ready to kill just to get a meal in their bellies. Jack and Harry were their names, Jesse recalled, and about the two dumbest boys Jesse had ever met. But they were put on patrol and given authority to capture or kill anyone trying to help slaves escape.

Every stream was being watched, and every boat, searched. Patrollers were riding constant vigil and each one of them had a reward poster offering five thousand dollars for the Raven’s capture--dead or alive.

Slaves were being whisked from under their owner's noses. At least four in three months. And all escapes were attributed to The Raven; his tell-tale black feather left as a taunting gesture.

The problem was nobody really knew what he looked like. That reward would sure be something, Jesse thought to himself, as he smeared the snot from his dripping nose and hacked up the rest of the tobacco he'd been chewing.

Jesse wasn't a volunteer. He was earning a few dollars for each mile he patrolled. It was his job. The local sheriff hired him because he needed more men to patrol the northern Kentucky border. Too many fugitives had been escaping.

Puffs of smoke expelled from Jesse's mouth. He shivered against the wind. He was tired and he knew that those two loafers, Jack and Harry had built themselves a fire and bedded down for the night. *It wasn't fair*. No one would blame him for going home early. He'd done his duty and earned his money. Anyway, talk of the Raven being loose was just that—talk. If it were up to him, he'd just let 'um go. Hell, no pay, bad food, back breaking work. He didn't blame the niggers for runnin' away. Still, he had a job to do.

Jesse let his horse lead while he burrowed inside his coat, drew his hat down, and closed his eyes, hoping to get some sleep.

\* \* \*

Down the road, the wagon rolled on through the darkness with only the lantern's dim circle of yellow light guiding the way. Valentine's eyes were almost swollen shut. His nose was running and the wind that whipped through his threadbare dress felt like hundreds of needlepoints stabbing his chest. He was miserable, but he knew that the

rescue was worth it. *One more soul to safety*, he repeated to himself, and to the rhythm of the rolling wagon.

Above and to the rear he heard Solomon softly snoring. *To be young and foolish*, Valentine thought. *No, to be young, foolish, and white*, he corrected himself.

“Solomon,” he whispered loudly, “Wake up we’re almost there.” Valentine heard Solomon stir and jump down off the wagon. Then Valentine spurred the mare on, hoping the old girl would make it to the river before she collapsed from the exertion.

\* \* \*

Jesse didn’t know how long he had napped. The screech of an animal woke him. He looked around, but the clouds partially obscured the moon. All he was able to make out in the darkness was the skeletal outlines of trees with their dying leaves rustling in answer to the chilling wind. Jesse reined his horse to a stop and listened.

He heard the sound of a wagon coming toward him. Muscles tensed, Jesse fumbled for his unlit lantern, but dropped it on the ground. It was lost in the darkness. Wagon wheels creaked up ahead. Jesse straightened up and spurred his horse on toward the sound.

The wagon’s lantern cast a faint, eerie circle of light around it. An old black woman sat on the wagon pulled by a horse that should have been dead, as old as it looked. Jesse jumped down from his horse and stood in the middle of the road, one hand raised, signaling a halt to the wagon. He walked closer as the wagon approached.

“Old Auntie, whatcha doin’ out this time a night?” he called out.

The old woman had gray frizzled hair peeking out from her dirty head rag. She smiled a ragged grin on a face that was tar black and pitted.

“I goin’ ta the graveyard, Massa. Ta the graveyard,” the woman said, stopping the wagon in front of Jesse. “I got me some peoples need ta be put ta rest, suh.” Her voice was as ancient as her face and sounded like flint on iron.

“Who says you kin be out this late, Auntie? You know there’s a curfew,” Jesse said, grabbing the bridle of the mare to steady the animal.

“Oh, ah knows, ah knows. But deese hyeah folks cain’t wait.” She gestured toward the back of the wagon with a slight turn of her head.

“Gimme your lantern, Auntie. Let me see what you got back there.” Jesse grabbed the light without waiting for a reply. He casually strolled to the back of the wagon and held the lantern high. The light illuminated six pine coffins piled on top of each other. With the light in one hand, he used his other to pry the top open.

“You do dat Massa, you let out de devil,” the old woman called after him.

“Stop talkin’ in riddles old woman. I gotta see what you got in these here coffins. I got to know how come you choosin’ to break the law.”

Jesse’s hand slid underneath the coffin top. He leaned over with the light to see better.

“You do that sir, you lettin’ out de devil cholera. These’m people done died from it. They gots ta be buried soon’s I get dem to de grave. Da devil cholera gonna grab ya tonight, put yer in de grave tomorrow. Make you run at both ends like the rushin’ river,” she cackled.

Jesse froze. He snatched his hand back from the coffin and backed away, bumping into his horse.

*Cholera*. There had been an outbreak in a town close to the Mississippi, and another one in Cincinnati. Five months before that, President Taylor had succumbed to the disease, dying in his own vomit and feces. Nobody knew what caused it, but if you got it, you would surely die within a day.

“Why you didn’t tell me, old woman? You tryin’ to kill me?” His anger sliced through the darkness.

“I done tol’ you, Massa. Got ta get dem to de graveyard foe sun up. Let dere spirits rest in peace, so dah devil cholera won’t git ter nobody else.”

Jesse thrust the lantern at the woman, grabbed the reins of his horse, and guided it away from the wagon. “Get on with ya then, and don’t you stop. Anybody stops you, you tell ‘um right away what you got in them coffins. You hear me old woman?”

By this time the woman had already started moving down the road before he could finish scolding her. He heard her gravelly voice break out in what he thought was mumble jumble. Half-singing, half-muttering, she headed the wagon toward the pauper’s graveyard that overlooked the river’s edge.

His soul is black, as black as night,  
A good luck omen to those in flight,  
For he has come to set them free.

Jesse Frye mounted his horse and galloped away. He no longer thought of the cold, only that he needed to put distance between him and the dreaded disease. So, he didn’t hear when another voice joined in lustily with that of the old woman’s as they sang the remaining stanzas:

And in the darkness he doth roam,  
A spirit sent to lead them home,  
Where freedom waits for them.

Who is this trickster, this dark knight?  
This spirit guide, this demon bright?  
They whisper Raven on the wind.

\* \* \*



## Chapter Two

Kentucky— Mercer Plantation—same night

“You cold, George?” Leona asked as she and her brother sat in the frigid air on a fallen log. They were just beyond sight of the main house and slave cabins.

“I’m fine for right now, but soon we’ll have to use the shed. It’s gonna be too cold in a little while to sit outside.” George wrapped his arms around himself to keep warm.

“Take my shawl and put it ’round ya.” Leona took the shawl from her head and gave it to her brother, then moved closer so he could get some of her body warmth.

She wished she could see him in daylight, to see how much he’d grown and filled out, but it was forbidden by order of Dr. Fowler, her master. If she wanted to see George, she had to sneak out after dark. It seemed that each time she met him, he’d grown inches taller. His chin stubble brushed against her face and tickled when they hugged. He was growing a beard like he threatened.

“Here, here’s some of the pie I made. It’s apple. I put raisins ’n pecans in it.”

“Ya know I don’ like no raisins,” George made a face.

“Yeah, but Dr. Fowler do; and Mrs. Fowler likes what Dr. Fowler likes,” she said, handing him the napkin with the huge chunk of pie.

“Just pick the things out or give it back, don’t make me no difference,” she grumbled.

He put his arm around his sister and leaned close to her.

“I ain’t lettin’ this pie go to waste, Le-le,” he said, using his childhood name for her because as a baby he couldn’t say Leona. “You can bet on that. Shoot, I ain’t had

nothin' this good since the last time you wuz here." He bit a piece off and hummed his approval.

"I swear you kin cook. Them Fowlers should be glad they got you. Master Mercer got the worse cook in the world. Shoot, even I kin cook better'n she kin. An' he think she the best thing that ever come 'long. Her cornbread taste like rocks. Like you got ta drink a pitcher of water jest to soften it up. I kin take her cornbread and throw it at one of dem pigs and knock 'um dead with one blow," he laughed and pretended to squeal like a pig in agony.

Leona listened to her brother's laughter. It had been a long time since she'd heard him laugh. "So, everythin' all right wit you? You doin' all right?"

He shrugged. "Doin' the best I kin. Ain't nothin' to get joyful about. Still the same thing. Up before the sun and in the fields. Gets a break by noon; 'n back to work until it git too dark to work," he sighed. "Le-le," he said quietly. "I heard that some of us gonna try and get to Ohio. It ain't that far. Maybe a few days walk and if they lucky, they can walk across if the river done hardened."

"Don't talk like that. You scare me when you talk like that," she said anxiously. "You don't know what them ab'litions do to ya. I hear they just try and sweet talk you into bein' put on a boat back to Africa...and you be eaten by de African niggers. And...and if they don't do dat, then they sell you again."

"Who told you that?" George asked angrily.

"Doctor Fowler say so. He say, them people like the Raven only out ta get they selves some free nigger labor or worse...he say they got ab'litions doctors who skin de black off de slave and sells it for leather and feeds de meat to the pigs."

“What? And you believe him? Huh? You believe all he say?” asked George.

“Girl, you ain’t got good sense. Why you think he say that?” But George didn’t wait for an answer. “He say that ‘cause he wanna keep you stupid and doin’ what he say. He wanna keep you as his slave. He don’t want you ta know what freedom’s like. You think livin’ with the Fowlers is livin’ high on the hog? You crazy girl,” he scolded. “That man ain’t good for nothin’. He livin’ off his wife’s money and he ain’t much of a doctor, truth be told. All he know how to do is bleed people dry ’n lie,” George said emphatically.

“Don’t matter,” she said angrily. “Don’t matter what he is. He still treat me okay; and she don’t mess with me—not really. So I got me a warm bed and a place to stay. I’ll be all right. I don’t need to be runnin’,” she shot back defiantly. Then she remembered about the other day. She had been washing clothes, and Dr. Fowler had demanded that she stop what she was doing to come and assist him.

\* \* \*

“Leona, I need you,” she heard Dr. Nathaniel Fowler’s voice carry on the wind. Leona shielded her eyes from the bright sun and saw her master standing in the doorway. His shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows, and a pair of scissors glinted in his hand. Leona looked down at her wash. The bubbling lye water seared her nose as the steam rose to meet the frosty air. Crows overhead glided in lazy circles, and caught the updraft. Their black bodies were silhouettes against the sky. Several were perched on the bare branches of trees, and cawed to their soaring mates.

Leona glanced up at the birds and wished she were that carefree. *To be a bird, to soar, to glide, to fly away.* Instead, she wiped the sweat from her forehead with her rough brown hand. She could not ignore her master.

“Dr. Fowler sir, I’m doin’ de wash,” Leona yelled back.

“Forget the wash, girl. This is more important. Come inside,” he ordered. He then abruptly turned and went back inside, closing the office door against the cold wind before she could protest any further. Leona grabbed the long wooden stick and stabbed the sheets in the boiling wash. She knew that he had chosen this time to interrupt her housekeeping chores because Mrs. Fowler was upstairs in her darkened bedroom after having taken ill with another one of her sick headaches.

Leona laid down the stick and dried her hands on her chintz housedress. Her bishop sleeves and bodice had gotten wet from the wash water, and were spotted from the fresh blood that soaked the linens.

Every Monday was washday. He knew that. For several weeks Dr. Fowler interrupted her chores with some urgency that—he claimed—only she could help him with. The “urgency” always corresponded to his wife’s sick spells. Because he was too cheap to buy another servant, seventeen-year old Leona tended to the housework as well as the doctor’s office.

Leona brushed away stray curly strands of hair that matted her forehead, wondering how long she could delay, before trying his patience. She looked up at the bedroom window where Mrs. Fowler lay, pretending to be asleep. She got no help from the mistress of the house. Mrs. Fowler, who barely took any interest in her husband’s profession, did not interfere; but that did not stop her from lurking in the hallways and spying on Leona’s every move.

On Mondays, the doctor’s linens had to be washed separately from the household linens. Those were Mrs. Fowler’s orders. Not one blood stained sheet was permitted to

touch the house linens.

Leona had to lug the heavy washtub from out of the barn. She would dig a hole, build a fire and set the tub over the fire. Then she would fill the wash tub with water from the pump and wait until the water was hot. Then she washed the clothes with soap so strong, it made her gasp for air.

After Leona hung the clothes on the line, Mrs. Fowler would come out and inspect the wash. If there was one speck of blood or dirt on any of the sheets, Leona would have to wash the clothes again. Once the wash finally met with Mrs. Fowler's approval, Leona would then dump the dirty wash water and lug the washtub back to the barn. It was an all day affair, and any delay meant that she could end up outside, late at night, trying to finish the wash.

Dr. Fowler always kept a clean set of clothing in his office. Leona caught him several times with his pants off behind a screen. Though he feigned modesty, she knew he timed his change of clothes to coincide with her office cleaning.

Once again the office door was flung open. "Leona!" he bellowed. The anger and impatience in his voice betrayed him. She had waited long enough. She left the wash to bubble on the fire and ran across the blanket of leaves to enter his office.

"What kept you so long?" he said, as he plopped down in his chair, his long legs stretched out on a hassock. The scissors, comb and brush were arranged on the table beside him. He had draped his jacket over another chair. He was lying almost prone, vest unbuttoned and shirtsleeves rolled up—a position befitting a man in the bedroom, rather than the office.

A full-length mirror that he used to guide him when operating on patients, was

placed at just the right angle so he could see her as she worked.

“Dr. Fowler,” Leona said meekly, with head down and rough hands hidden behind the folds of her skirt. “You know I got to do the wash. I cain’t be in two places at the same time,” she protested feebly.

He waved away her protest. “There will always be dirty linens. I need my hair trimmed. I’m not paying a barber to do something that I know you can do quite well. He laid his head back on the chair and closed his eyes.

Leona glanced around the room. She noticed that one of the doors to the medicine cabinet was open. A clear glass bottle was missing. She saw it lying on the surgical table. She bent over and sniffed near Dr. Fowler. He sometimes took his own medicine and when he did that, he went into alternative fits of laughter and crying. She did not smell the odor of the medicine on him; only his rank body odor. She also noticed that the door leading to the living quarters was closed. There would be no interruptions, although she knew that Mrs. Fowler was apt to lurk behind the door.

Even with his eyes closed, he followed her movements behind him by the swish of her long skirt.

Leona took the brush in her hand, hesitated above his head and then, with resignation, began to brush his shoulder length straight hair that was greasy with pomade. The room was cold and her dress was still wet from the wash.

He turned to look at her. “You cold?”

“Yes, Massa. Just a little, sir.”

“Well, this won’t take long. You can warm up afterwards when you’re through.”

“Yes, sir,” she said quietly, knowing that he’d purposely not made a fire. Her wet

bodice clung to her shivering body and the nipples of her breasts stood erect.

“Now, I want you to cut it evenly. I don’t like it too short, you know.”

“Yes, sir,” she leaned her body into him. She felt him lean his weight against her. Leona took his long thick hair and wrapped the ends around her fingers. She held the scissors in her hand and snipped the ends. She took another strand and did the same. She saw him watching her in the mirror. He saw her watching him. She forced herself not to think of how sharp the scissors were.

He visibly relaxed under her touch. “I operated on a patient today,” he said with a note of satisfaction in his voice. “The chucklehead had an infection in his leg. I had to cut it out. I gave him something to ease his discomfort,” he chuckled. “He didn’t feel a thing. I tell you that new medicine worked like a charm. Too bad it’s wasted on a stupid bastard who cut himself trying to fell a tree. The trick is, not to use too much of the chloroform...just a little once in awhile, gives one a euphoric feeling. Yes, and relaxing.”

*And makes you crazy.* “Yes sir.” Leona made no comment about the amount of blood that had smeared the sheets.

“I poured my tonic over the surgical wound. He should be fine in a few days. I told him to keep off that leg.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, shivering.

“Now, I want you to cut it evenly. I don’t like it too short, you know.” He reached up and touched her hand. His fingers caressed hers. She moved her hand away and loosened her grip on the scissors.

“Why I should pay a barber to do what you can do just as well is beyond me. A waste of money and time, I’d say.”

Leona made no comment but concentrated on getting the ends straight.

“That’s what happens when you go to one of these barbers. You sit and wait your turn and listen to the gossip. Oh, once in awhile it’s good to get away, find out what’s going on in the county. But one hair cut can take hours. Waste of time and money, I’d say, especially when I have you.”

Leona checked to see that the ends of her master’s hair were even all the way across before she cut it even shorter. She was aware of his body odor mixed with the tonic he used earlier to clean the man’s wound. Both seemed to smother her with their scent and she wrinkled her nostrils in protest. A floorboard creaked in another part of the house. Leona knew it was Mrs. Fowler sneaking around. Leona felt trapped.

She looked out and saw a shadow cross the window; it was a large black bird, a Raven that landed on a branch. His sleek body arched toward her. He tapped on the glass with his beak; danced backward along the branch, then forward to tap the window again and dance back again. *A dance of freedom*, she thought. *He’s mocking me*. She turned from the window and her glance landed on the scalpels and knives lying on the instrument table. She stole a look at the mirror and watched Dr. Fowler breathe easily in sleep. *It would be so easy*. Her hand hovered over the scalpel. But she wouldn’t, she couldn’t.

\* \* \*

Leona came back to the present and snuggled close to her brother while he ate, but she still felt the touch of Dr. Fowler’s clammy hands on her and she shivered.

“You cold?” George said, putting his arms around her. George wished he could



see his sister's face. Her large, cat-like brown eyes glowed when she was happy and flashed when she was angry. She had smooth, mocha colored skin and full lips that pinched in a thin line when she was expressing disapproval. Her eyes danced with joy whenever he did anything to make her laugh.

As a young boy George remembered watching his sister braid her thick, curly hair in two braids and wrapping them on top of her head. One of them would always come apart and unravel, making it an attractive target for pulling.

Though she was unaware of it, his sister was beautiful. George knew it was a matter of time before some white man would have his way with her—to rape her. More than likely it would be Fowler. George expressed his concern out loud.

“You wait till you get older. You’ll see what I’m talkin’ about. He take a good look at you in the light next to his wife and he gonna git him some, cause he ain’t gettin’ none from that bag a bones.”

She raised her hand to hit him playfully, but his remark found its target. Her hand landed hard on the side of his face.

“Hey, what you wanna do that for?” he rubbed his cheek.

“I don’t like you talkin’ that way. I don’t like that kind of talk,” her voice trembled.

“He touch you?”

She hesitated.

“He *did* touch you.”

She lied. “No, no...not...not really. He don’t touch me but...”

“But, what?”

Tears of shame ran down her cheek. “Sometimes, he...like come up behind me and...and...he...rub up against me, like he was bumpin’ into me. Or he move in too close or...he...” she broke down and sobbed.

George put his arm around her and let her cry on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. You go and you tell his wife ‘bout it.”

Leona shook her head. “No, she...she...don’t do nothin.’ Jest stay in her room all the time. I think she know what he be doin’, but she don’t wanna know; so she look the other way.”

Mrs. Annie Fowler married the doctor but she detested his profession. To appease her, he turned one room of their rambling clapboard house into his office; equipped with a separate entrance and exit. That way, his patients would not disturb her. Mrs. Fowler hated to be around sick people. Yet, she was forever complaining about her own illnesses. She was so afraid that one of his patients might have some contagious disease, that she gave strict orders that nothing in the doctor’s office could come in contact with anything in the household.

Mrs. Fowler also detested Leona, whom she pinched and hit whenever her husband wasn’t around. No, Mrs. Fowler would do nothing to stop her husband from harassing her. She preferred, instead, to punish Leona.

“Well next time he try somethin’, you just tell him you got yourself a brother who gonna come over and beat him.”

That sent a shock of terror through her. “Don’t talk like that, ya hear? Don’t you even think it. You don’t know how mean he kin be. All he gonna do is take it out on me.

He told me he don't want me to see you. I had to sneak out tonight. He'll take it out on me. And you too—somehow.”

And so her baby brother just rocked her in his arms as she sobbed softly. They had always been close. Leona was cautious, hesitant and slow to rile. George, on the other hand, was a risk-taker and joker, quick to smile and quick to anger. They had been sheltered by their Aunt Sara from the cruelties of slavery when they were young. Aunt Sara's mistress was kind-hearted and promised that one day all of them would be free. However, one day the mistress died suddenly. Unfortunately, Aunt Sara was unable to convince the heirs of the validity of that promise.

The one thing Aunt Sara managed to do was get the heirs to agree that they would not sell Leona and George too far apart from one another. They now lived several miles apart: George as a field hand on the Mercer plantation, and Leona as a house slave to a doctor.

The brother and sister held on to one another in silence, one feeling the heartbeat of the other; two hearts beating in rhythm.

“It time for me to go,” Leona said, reluctantly pulling away. “I got to get back ‘fore they wake up. Don't you go gettin' into trouble, ya hear? And don't you start talkin' ‘bout runnin' or puttin' up a fuss.”

“I won't Le-le. You just take care. And stay as far away from Fowler as you can. Hide if you got to.”

“Oh yeah. What kinda house girl I'm gonna be if I keep hidin' from the folks I'm supposed to serve?”

“That why we can run, Le-le. We can run and everything gonna be all right.”

“Stop. Stop talkin’ like that,” she pleaded. “I gotta go.” She rose and handed him a bundle of clothes. “This here I saved for you. Should keep you warm,” she said, handing him one of Fowler’s old coats. He put it to his nose.

“Ugh, white man smell. Gotta brush this ‘fore I turn into a white man,” he said, laughing. She laughed with him, kissed him on his stubbly cheek, and got one more hug before she took off again.

As she skirted the Mercer plantation and headed toward the trail that took her back home to the Fowlers, Leona thought about what George said about Dr. Fowler. She remembered an argument she’d overheard between Fowler and his wife. Mrs. Fowler screamed and begged Dr. Fowler to come to her bed.

“I have patients!” he screamed back.

“It’s not the patients you’re interested in,” she’d overheard Mrs. Fowler say. “You mind yourself. Or you’ll have hell to pay,” she threatened. “I know what you’re up to and you won’t get your way with her, not as long as I’m alive.”

Leona dashed past their door in time to catch the last part of their argument before Fowler stormed out. He went back to his study where he slept most nights. Leona heard Mrs. Fowler crying.

\* \* \*

Leona picked her way through the heavy brush, stepping gingerly among the rocks and fallen trees. She saw her breath in the cold night air, which was about the only thing she could see. With the moon disappearing among the clouds, it was like walking through ink. Luckily, she had made these secret trips in the dark to see George before.

She felt confident she could find her way back home, and to her room, before the Fowlers awoke.

There would be no time left to sleep. It would take her another twenty minutes to make it back. Then she would steal upstairs to her attic room to keep from disturbing the Fowlers. She would have to be up by five; start the fires, cook breakfast, sweep the floor in Dr. Fowler's office, and lay out the linen. No, she wouldn't get much sleep, but getting to see her brother had been worth the trip.

Leona stepped into a clearing and was ready to spring across to the other side when she heard a horse approaching. She couldn't tell which direction it was coming from, and decided to take a chance and run for it. The horse and rider seemed to come from out of nowhere. The horse overtook Leona as she ran through the frost-covered meadow with her skirts hiked up. She plunged into the underbrush, trying to keep her lead, but she stumbled and fell and her skirt became entangled on a prickly bush.

The rider hunched over and grabbed Leona by her coat collar. She toppled and fell again; but the rider kept his hold on her, dragging her across brambles as she flayed helplessly for a short distance until, finally, he dropped her. She lay winded on the frozen ground, her hands and face cut and bleeding. Her coat and dress both ripped, so that she felt the cruel cold against her naked shoulders.

Two booted feet stood before her.

"Where was you runnin' too?"

His voice seemed far away. She thought she would black out but blinked, hoping to clear her vision.

"Get up, gal!"

She couldn't move, her body wouldn't respond.

He bent over. "I said, get up!"

She struggled to get to her feet as he pulled her up by her braided hair. She staggered against him. He instinctively shoved her away.

"I asked you a question. "Where was you runnin'?" His tone as frosty as the night air.

Her eyes focused, but it was too dark to see his face, just the outline of his body. She knew he was white and young. *Patroller!*

"You tell me where you was runnin'?"

"I...I wa...wa...sn't...run...run..." She was so terrified that she choked on her words.

"You was headin' somewhere in the middle of the night. Now you answer me before I beat it outta you."

"Nowhere. Wasn't runnin' no where."

"Then what you doin' out here this time a night if you wasn't runnin'?"

She didn't know what to say. *If I tell him I went to see my brother, I'll get him in trouble too.*

"I went to...to...I..."

He laughed. "You cain't even lie right. You was runnin' all right. Well, we'll just take you in and let the sheriff deal with you."

"No....please, I...I was just goin' home. Dr. Fowler is my master...he just live over yonder," she pointed off in the distance.

"He know you out this late?"

Leona shook her head.

Maybe it was because he'd had no sleep, was cold and tired, or maybe his fear numbed his compassion, but Jesse Frye had had enough for one night and wasn't inclined to be lenient. He pushed her forward. "Okay, gal, you comin' with me. I got a rope. I'm tying your hands. Then we'll just march to the jail and let them figure out what to do with you."

The young patroller mounted his horse and set an exhausting pace covering the three miles to the jail while Leona stumbled beside him. By the time they got there, the sun was up. She was bruised and battered, her clothes torn and her wrists and feet bloody from the ropes and the walk. He untied her hands and pushed her roughly in the arms of a deputy.

"See you caught yo'self a pretty little nigger gal, Jesse," said the slack jawed deputy named Russell. He slapped Jesse on the back. He shoved Leona in a cell with one hand, and gnawed on a piece of chicken with the other. "'Bout time you caught somethin'," he said, almost choking from laughter.

Young Jesse Frye nodded "Yeah, somethin' besides my death of cold," Jesse grinned and wiped the snot from his dripping nose. *Or Cholera.*

### Chapter Three

Outside Ripley, Ohio—near dawn

Captain Thaddeus Moxley scratched his beard that he was sure was crawling with lice, as he listened slacked-eyed to the young Kentucky planter drone on about the difficulties of keeping slaves. Moxley was stuck near Ripley when the alarm sounded that

several slaves had escaped from Kentucky. Until they were captured or the authorities gave him an all clear, his steamer, the *Annabelle*, was docked indefinitely and he was a captive audience to a snot-nosed boy who fancied himself a gentleman planter. He would have been half-way to Cincinnati by now with his cargo and that much closer to buying his steamer out-right.

Luckily for him, the young Ephraim Mercer had deep pockets as well as a loose mouth. Moxley looked around for the tavern owner, but did not see him. Only a handful of customers were here this time of morning, waylaid no doubt because of the hunt for fugitives. Some were asleep at the long wooden tables, while others were drinking. A family was huddled around the enormous fireplace that kept the tavern warm. They were a miserable lot—weary travelers going nowhere.

It could be worse, thought Moxley, we could be stuck in Ripley and I'd have to listen to this jabbermouth without a drink. In a town with more than fifteen hundred people, Ripley was as dry as a bone. Thank God, just outside of the city limits "coffee houses" flourished. Moxley tipped the whiskey to his lips and drank greedily while he feigned interest in what the young planter was saying.

"You see captain, it's not like the old days. Slaves nowadays think they can get away with anything. Plus they're liable to run away thanks to them confounded abolitionists. They're more organized than ever, especially since that Compromise went through. They are determined to steal a man's property; and then they wanna be self-righteous about it."



“Ya don’t say.” Moxley stifled a yawn. The planter’s monotone was putting him to sleep. Still he had more drinking to do, especially since the young man was buying.

“I do say,” the young planter went on. “You see, unlike me, smaller planters are fit to be tied. If the slaves run away, they have to hire bounty men to find them. If these slaves continue to be recalcitrant, doing things like sabotaging the machinery or stealing provisions then they must be dealt with immediately. Like apples, these slaves have to be gotten rid of before they infect the whole barrel. But the small farmer still has to pay an agent to take the bad one’s off his hands. All of us are losing money. Small and large planters alike. I have a fairly good-sized operation, and even I am feeling the expense every time I must get rid of my unwanted property.”

“Ya don’t say.” The captain cocked his hat to one side and scratched his full head of hair. He felt something crawl along his fingers and squashed the bug.

“Captain, care for another round?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Sure, Mr. Mercer, sir.”

The Kentuckian snapped his fingers. When that didn’t work, he yelled. “Hey, you over there.”

The tavern owner came running barefoot to the table.

“Another round for me and the captain please,” Mercer said flourishing his empty glass. “And make it quick sir.”

The tavern owner scurried from the table to get their order.

“And now,” Mercer continued, “...we have to contend with this confounded Raven.”

“A bird?”

“Hardly. Raven is a slave rescuer, or at least that’s what he calls himself. He sneaks into the area, steals our slaves and takes them across the Ohio. Then he taunts us by leaving a black feather and even brags about his exploits in the paper. Look at this.” Mercer went into his pocket and took out a folded newspaper. The young man sighed and pointed to a passage. Then read:

Who is this trickster, this dark knight.  
This spirit guide, this demon bright.  
They whisper Raven on the wind.

“With every successful exploit he publishes these...these...poems to mock us and make fools of the law-abiding Southern men whose property he steals.” Mercer crumpled the paper and let it lay in a ball on the table.

The tavern owner returned to their table a few moments later with a bottle. Moxley took control of it and poured himself a large drink. He continued to endure the planter’s endless complaints, scratching his lice infected head and beard as he listened.

“You are lucky sir,” Mercer leaned over the table and gave the captain a glassy-eyed stare. “How I wish I could ply the waters on a steamer such as yours, having adventures, meeting all sorts of people. Instead I am confined to the farm I inherited as well as the blasted slaves that came with it,” he slurred.

“Have yourself another, son. It cain’t be all that bad.” Moxley slid the bottle over to Mercer. The young planter sighed and poured a drink.

“How I envy you,” he spat.

Moxley gave the boy a disdainful look. He knew that the planter would not last two days as captain of a steamer. Moxley had lived most of his life on the river, first as a young deck hand, and later as a pilot. He had been captain of a barge and had finally

scraped up enough money to buy the *Annabelle*. He owed his creditors, however, and the only way he could keep a crew was by keeping them plied with whiskey and bribed with stolen cargo.

By the time the *Annabelle* left Ripley for Cincinnati, he was sure he would lose another one of his crewmembers. *What the hell*. His men were as dispensable as the machinery he constantly had to replace on the boiler. He would find some roustabout. Keeping a loyal crew was not one of Captain Moxley's strengths. He worked them long and hard. On the trip up the Mississippi River, he had lost one crewmember due to fire and another when they hit a shoal at night, throwing the hapless boy overboard. By the next landing, Moxley had replaced both.

"All of us are in the same boat, so to speak." The planter continued with his ramblings. "Debts. Taxes. They're constant. The only thing we can do is sell off something—slaves mostly, but never the land."

"Well, it seems to me that you boys need to sell your slaves as a group instead of individually like you is doin' now. That way you only have one agent to pay. Ship 'um down to New Orleans. Them folks down there always lookin' for slaves, especially nigger gals pretty enough to be fancy girls to fill them bawdy houses of theirs. Or strong field hands for the cane and cotton fields. They die off pretty regular doin' that work."

The planter was holding his drink as he stared blankly at the captain. "What?" was all he could manage to get out.

"*I said* why don't you sell 'um all at once and ship 'um down to New Orleans. That way you save on shippin' and agentin' fees. Hell, I know some folks in New Orleans, buy 'um off you sight unseen. That's how bad they need slaves."

“We’d not thought of that. Yes, yes. We could.” Mercer eagerly downed his drink. “Would you be willing to take them?”

“Cargo is cargo to me, son. Don’t matter whether it’s a bale, hoghead or human. Tell me how many you got, and I’ll negotiate a fair price. I’ll take my share from the sale.” Then he leaned over toward Mercer. “I’m takin’ the risk, just so you know. Slaves on a ship is a tricky proposition. They like to jump overboard, don’t you know. If ya still interested, just name the place and time. And a handshake will seal the deal. I’ll act as your agent.”

“Let’s see, I’ll have to go back and talk it over. But I’m sure the rest of the planters would agree. How will I get in touch with you?” Mercer asked, eagerly.

“The *Annabelle* is headed to Cincinnati where I got business,” Moxley informed him. “We’ll lay up for awhile in Louisville and start the trip to New Orleans. We’ll work the lower Mississippi, then come back this way if I get my quota of cargo.”

“Good.” Mercer could barely contain himself now. “Then I’ll get word to you in Louisville. I’ll tell you the place and date. I know it won’t be until December or maybe January.”

“Don’t make it too late in the season,” the captain cautioned. “The Ohio can ice up. Cain’t guarantee we can get through if it does.”

The young planter smiled broadly and held up his glass. “You’ve got it, Captain,” he said, holding out his hand. The Captain pressed his palm into the planter’s soft, cool flesh that felt like the underside of a dead fish.

And while wiping tables, the barefoot tavern owner lurked unnoticed within earshot of the two men.

\* \* \*

Near Ripley, Ohio—dawn

Reverend Trout took another sheet of heavy linen paper from his desk drawer and stared at it by the tallow candle light. He was hoping something would come to him before sunlight peaked through the window, but his mind wasn't focusing on the task. His troubles were pressing on him, drowning out any thoughts of blood-washed salvation. He had recently received a missive from a presiding elder urging him to break from the church's pro-slavery doctrine. Furthermore, he was to persuade his congregation to aid in anti-slavery activities. While Reverend Trout sympathized with the cause, he could not comply with the missive because it was against the law; and he was a man who lived by the rules.

He felt himself sinking deeper—mired in confusion, fear, and doubt. His faith in his fellow man and in his own actions seemed to belie God's love. He knew it was time to pray, for he was a troubled man.

Reverend Trout rose and walked toward the window, looked out on the gentle signs of the approaching dawn, and with some difficulty, pulled his nightshirt around him and lowered himself to the floor. He clasped his hands together.

"Dear God, you have delivered me through all the storms in my life," he said in a reverent whisper. "Deliver me now through this one. I am your humblest of servants who needs your help."

The Reverend John Trout shifted his ample weight and sighed. “When I see suffering I must do something about it...that extends to our darker hued brethren whose inferior breeding and lack of intelligence prevents them from rising above their station. Because of my belief, I have done all I can, including supporting the Colonization Society’s efforts to send them back to the jungles from whence they came. For their land beckons them to return, unshackled and free. They are not a God-fearing lot with their primitive ways. And so, they belong with their kind, leaving us this land.”

Then he heard a rustle and the muffled sound of feet on his doorstep. The front door creaked open and someone entered. It was rare, but not uncommon for marauders to be afoot. The reverend’s modest home was on the outskirts of town. There was the occasional assault on sleeping innocents.

His first thought was to hide, but the years of his wife’s cooking and passive lifestyle left him overweight and too slow to rise without effort. From where he was kneeling he couldn’t see who was sneaking into his parlor.

He heard the person walk stealthily across the floor and stand in his study doorway. He heard short-winded, uneven breathing. He turned his head and saw, by the flickering candle, a black woman who clutched old rags in her arms. The woman’s clothes smelled of mud and hung heavy with dampness. The rags moved and a whimper issued from them. It was a baby.

“ ‘scuse me, sir. I see de light and ...and ...thought ...I ...my baby and me...we’s powerfully tired sir. Can you help us? A little food?” Her voice trailed off as if talking was exhausting.

The Reverend John Trout rose stiffly and stood in front of the bedraggled woman. “Massa, I seen de light.” she cowed, backing herself in a corner, clutching her child protectively. Reverend Trout glanced at the dancing flame, then at the window. He realized he had inadvertently signaled that his was a safe house.

“Of course, the light. You followed the light.”

“Yes, sir. I come from over yonder, ‘cross the river...Kentucky,” she said softly, her eyes shifting toward the door, ready to escape.

Reverend Trout was torn. This woman needed help, yet she was a fugitive; an escaped slave. If he helped her, he would be committing a crime. He stood paralyzed.

“Massa a piece of bread? A drink of water? I’ll be gone before the sun is full up,” she begged. He looked toward the ragged bundle she carried and could not turn her away.

“I’ll start a fire. Your baby must be cold. He gently escorted her to a chair then he stoked the fire to a roaring blaze. The slave woman spread her legs wide to make a lap cradle for her sleeping child. She turned her face toward him.

“Thank you, Massa.”

“How did you get across?” he asked as he threw another log on.

“I got word to go to the road tonight and wait ‘til I hear a bird call, so I wait in the bushes. That’s what I done. I waited. Seem like forever. Then I hears this wagon comin’ towards me. This white man, he’s on top of the wagon. And this old black woman drivin’ it. And when I come out, the man jumps down and takes my hand.

“I’s scared to death,” she said, holding out her hands to the flames and shaking her head. Her eyes fixed on the fire. “I cain’t go back. And I was too afeared to go

forward, sir.” The slave woman stared into the roaring fire. Her baby moved in her lap.

“Please sir, my baby done had no milk. I...I got to...” she looked down at her breast.

Flustered, the reverend averted his eyes, embarrassed by the fullness of the slave woman’s dark breasts.

“Yes, yes, I quite understand. I...I’ll get my wife,” he stuttered. The Reverend Trout turned to go, but then turned back. “What happened when you got ashore?”

The slave woman stopped, her hand hovered over her open bodice. “Yes, sir. I made it along with another. But when they let us out, the woman, the one what steered the wagon and took us by boat, was gone. The white man what was wit her tol’ us to move to the light what was up on a hill. The other slave, he was a man, he started to climb the hill, but I cain’t. It was too much, not with me and my baby, and he, the other nigger, don’t help me.

“I wasn’t gonna make it fo’ sun up. So I headed back down and wandered in the bushes. Seem like hours, then I see your light. I waited to see if it was safe. I see you at the window...lookin’ out...like you was lookin’ for somethin’ and then I...I think maybe you would help and I come here.” Her dark eyes, lighted by the flames, searched Reverend Trout’s, looking for reassurance.

Reverend Trout nodded his understanding. The signal was a light in the window, if it was dark, or a dozen other signals that indicated a house was a safe haven for a fugitive. The fugitive slaves wandered through, stopping for a few hours or a few days at a safe house until they could move on to another.

“Do you know your next stop?”



The woman shook her head. “No, Massa. All’s we was told was to go to the light on the hill,” she said, rocking her child as the baby suckled. “I been out in these woods, wanderin’ for a while. Couldn’t rightly tell you where I was or where I am now,” she said rocking and cooing at her child. The woman’s eyes closed and she fought to keep them open. It was apparent to Reverend Trout that this runaway was too tired to go any farther.

While climbing the stairs to wake his wife Martha, Reverend Trout passed the picture of Jesus at the Rock of Gethsemane. He had passed the picture many times without a second notice, but this time Reverend Trout stopped and in the dim light from the early morning sun, he saw the face of Jesus, and realized in a flash of insight that this woman who found him had come in answer to his prayers.

Reverend John Trout who prided himself on never taking an action that would offend, or have an opinion that would incite, decided that very moment that it was his duty as a man of the cloth to help the fugitive slave woman seek sanctuary. He would break the country’s law as well as violate the Plan of Separation, adopted by his fellow Southern Methodists. He would be like Moses leading her to freedom. He would conduct her to the next safe house himself.

## Chapter Four

Ripley, Ohio—dawn

The pounding was incessant.

Valentine heard it through the fog of his nightmare—always the same—he was running and hiding. It was the pounding of the horses as they raced behind him, hunting him down. He heard them coming closer and was too afraid to look back. He ran on as the air seared his throat. His muscles ached. His legs felt like lead, but still he ran,

anticipating shouts of triumph from the horsemen as they drew nearer. He had to find some place to hide. A cave...a barn...some place where they could not find him. This time, they would kill him. The pounding grew louder.

They were right behind him. They were so close he could feel the hot breath of the horse on his back. He screamed. "Please God, no!"

He jerked awake, panting for air and looking around his darkened room only to hear the pounding once more. At first he thought the noise was coming from above him... *Solomon drunk again...* only to realize that someone was at the shop door.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," Valentine shouted as his bare feet touched the cold wooden planks and he shivered. He struggled into his pants, retrieving them from the floor. He fumbled in the darkness to find the shirt he'd thrown over the chair. Valentine shuffled to the burlap curtain that separated his shop from his living quarters.

The pounding continued; it was a steady hammering that matched the ache in Valentine's head. He had had less than three hours sleep and had been looking forward to sleeping in this Sunday.

"Coming," he shouted to the person on the other side of the shop door as he rushed to the front. His shop windows were shuttered so that everything in the room was a uniform, undefined blackness. As he stepped into the shop, he had to feel his way through the darkness and stumbled, stubbing his toe on the cold wood stove.

"Damn!" The pain was so excruciating it took his breath away. He rested his hand on the back of the barber chair and sucked the wind back into his body.

The pounding wouldn't stop.

“Lord God, this better be good.” Valentine limped toward the door and jerked it open. He stood there in the freezing morning cold, half dressed, staring into the face of a grizzled stranger who smiled at him drunkenly.

“May I help you?” Valentine said tersely, looking up at the drunk.

“Yeah, yeah. I come for a shave.” The grizzled man said, weaving in the doorway. “I come to get cleaned up. Shave and hair cut. Lice,” he said smiling through a beard glistening with saliva and matted with tobacco juice.

Valentine’s head still pounded. It was in rhythm with the pain in his toe. He stared up at the giant intruder through the weak morning light that highlighted the stranger’s profile.

“This is the Sabbath. We don’t open until after church, in the afternoon.” And he pointed to the hand painted sign over the door. The man’s eyes followed Valentine’s finger and squinted, trying to focus. He shifted his gaze back to Valentine and sagged against the entranceway, smiling.

“Cain’t see. I come for a shave and hair cut. Goin’ to ‘nnatti ...Cincinnati. I’m Cap...Captain Moxley of the *Annabelle*. They searchin’ the river for some runaways. Won’t let my steamer leave ‘til later this mornin’. I got time.”

“I don’t open ‘til noon on the Sabbath. Come back then.” He tried to close the door but the man lodged his huge hand between the door and the opening; a hand that looked as if it had strangled chicken and human necks without making a distinction

“Pay you well. Hair cut and shave. More’n you’ll make this whole day.”

Valentine sighed and closed his eyes. He wasn’t in the mood to argue. “Let me see your money.”

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of crumpled bills.

“All right come in and take a seat. It’s going to be awhile before we start. I got to heat up the stove, boil water, and sharpen the razors. Just sit over there while I get things ready.”

The man weaved toward the outline of a straight back chair in the corner. He flopped down and let out a heavy sigh, then belched.

“You got anything to drink?” he slurred.

“I can make some coffee when the stove’s hot,” Valentine replied, lighting several oil lamps in the shop to chase the glum.

“That’ll do...I guess,” the stranger said slouching low in the chair. His feet stuck out in front of him, and his head rested on the wall that was lined with newspaper to keep the wind from blowing through the cracks. Within seconds he nodded off.

Valentine Kass disappeared into the back room where he slept and took his time with his daily ablution. Last night’s adventure had left him bone weary. Two rescues, three if he counted the baby, all safely deposited in Ohio.

Valentine had spent hours getting into costume and make-up at Solomon’s insistence.

“Pretend you’re one of Macbeth’s witches,” Solomon had quipped as he had corked Valentine’s face to make it darker and pitted. Little did either of them know at the time that the cork would irritate Valentine’s eyes so badly, that he would be nearly blinded.

They’d gotten Captain Julius and the boy Tom to take them across the river, arranged to have a funeral wagon and coffins waiting for them, then made the long drive

to pick up the two runaways. One was a middle-aged man who feared he was being sold to pay off his master's debts. The other was a young woman with a baby who was willing to run to escape her master's affection until she saw that she had to hide in a coffin. Then her superstitious nature took over.

"I should have stayed in the theater," Valentine said to himself as he plucked the last of the caked make-up from his face and rubbed the axle grease from his hair. He brushed his thick hair, patting it in place with the tips of his fingers that were lightly scented with fragrant oil of Bergamot. He dressed with care, making sure his broad necktie was properly flounced and his apron neatly tied.

This fastidiousness extended to his living quarters. It was almost monastic, with the exception of the dress and wig he still had from last night. Valentine made a mental note to return them to Solomon's apartment.

Valentine was a stickler for appearance and cleanliness even though most of his customers were quite the opposite. After a busy day, his shop often smelled of unwashed bodies and unkempt teeth, and he would have to open both the front and back doors to air out the place. He also burned a mixture of rosemary and sage oils nightly to remove the stench of dirty hair and foul body odor.

Valentine leisurely crammed wood and paper into the stove and struck a match, setting the whole thing ablaze. Then he went outside into the cold, pumped water into a bucket, trudged back into the shop and set the bucket on the stove to boil.

\* \* \*

He glanced over at his first customer of the day who was still sleeping fitfully. Valentine stacked clean towels on one side of the counter, checked the boiling water in

the bucket and then ladled some into the coffee pot where he spooned several heaping tablespoons of coffee to brew. He then opened the shutters, allowing the dawn to peek through what morning light there was. Next, he lined up in a row his tortoise shell and bone straight razor set and sharpened them methodically against the razor strap, beating out a syncopated rhythm as he sharpened the points and heels of each one. Valentine owned one of the finest German straight razor sets around, and he kept their edges smooth and in excellent condition with periodic grinding.

Once done, Valentine was ready to begin, but he wanted to bask in the silence of his shop before he awakened his customer. He poured hot coffee in a tin cup and sat down in the padded barber chair he had imported from Philadelphia. He designed it and was pleased with the hand-carved, serpent armrests, rubbed shiny with use. The plush green velvet tufted seat and back allowed for customer comfort. And a mechanism at the iron base, which he had once seen on a dentist chair, allowed him to recline and swivel his customer. It was one of a kind, but it was worth it, he thought as he slid down in the seat and propped his legs up on the footrest.

The river town of Ripley was awakening. Through the window, Valentine could see early morning wagons and people on horseback. The Sabbath was holy for some, and just another workday for others. Ripley was always bustling with work: flatboats, barges, keelboats, and steamers carrying cargo and passengers to the Mississippi and back. Only Cincinnati was busier. *More people, more customers.* He looked over at the slumping drunk and sighed. The man would not appreciate his art; his were the clothes of a river rat.

The coffee served to revive Valentine and he stretched, yawned, and poured more coffee into another tin cup. He glanced at his razor selection and decided that a wide-edged one would be appropriate to trim the man's thick curly beard. Before he touched the man's hair, he would wash it with strong lye soap to delouse him. Valentine sipped the hot brew and set it down to test the razor's edge against his finger. Satisfied that it was sharp enough to begin, he walked over to his customer, coffee in one hand and razor in the other. When the man's eyes opened, he began talking to Valentine as if they were continuing a conversation.

"Take 'um to New Orleans, that's the deal." Saliva drooled down the man's beard. "Gotta pick up the slaves ..." the man mumbled and shifted his weight, righting himself.

Valentine inched closer. "Where?" He whispered. "Where will you pick...?"

The man's eyes jerked open wide and he jumped to his feet, knocking over the chair. He waved his arms in a defensive posture as he shouted, "Nigger what the hell you think you doin'?"

Valentine did not shrink from the man's aggressive outburst, but calmly held the coffee out again.

"Sir, you wanted a shave and a haircut. I am your barber. Valentine Kass is my name."

End of Excerpt